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Press Release: UGA ECOLOGIST AND CORAL REEF EXPERT PART OF TEAM THAT DISCOVERED BOMBS, SUNKEN SHIPS OFF DISPUTED PUERTO RICAN ISLAND

ATHENS, Ga. -- James Porter, a professor of ecology and marine sciences at the University of Georgia, was the coral reef expert who, with two other divers, discovered that live bombs and two sunken ships lay in the waters off the Puerto Rican island of Vieques.

Existence of the bombs and possible toxic waste in dozens of corroding drums still on the two vessels was made public today.

"My view is the long view," said Porter, a top coral reef expert who for many years has studied the decline of coral reefs around the world. "The question is my mind is simply this: How can we promote conservation in one of the most beautiful places on earth?"

The island, which is within sight of the main island of Puerto Rico on its western end, has been the subject of controversy for years but intensely so since a Marine pilot dropped an errant bomb that killed a civilian security guard on the range which has been used for 58 years to prepare U.S. Navy and Marine forces for combat. Months of top-level negotiations with the U.S. government followed, during which President Clinton agreed not to reopen the site to live-fire training missions but proposed to reserve the right, over a phase-out period, to use it 90 days a year for use with "inert" bombs filled with concrete so that pilots could practice bombing techniques.

Puerto Rico's government and religious leaders subsequently rejected the compromise, and protests began on behalf of the island and its civilian population of more than 9,000. Protesters have been occupying parts of the Vieques range since April.

Porter's involvement began in July when the Puerto Rican government, seeking legal advice in dealing with the U.S. Navy, retained the Atlanta firm of King & Spalding, which hired Porter and two other men: James Barton of Underwater Ordnance Removal, Inc., a Virginia firm, and Fred Hoverkamp of Explosive and Reactive Materials, Inc., which is located in New Jersey. Together, at the request of the Puerto Rican government, Porter and Barton first visited Vieques on July 31 to examine the coral reef.

"The Puerto Ricans said they were told the holes in the reefs came from hurricanes and that there were no bombs in the waters off the islands," said Porter. "We examined the area carefully and found that the holes were not from hurricanes, and there were a large number of live bombs in the waters as much as 400 yards offshore hundreds of live artillery shells and bombs."

While negotiations continued between governor Pedro Rossello of Puerto Rico and U.S. officials in Washington, Puerto Rican officials asked the team to return once more to look

for other evidence of damage to the coral reef. It was on this trip on Nov. 26, when the team discovered the wreckage of two ships loaded with barrels, some of which appeared to contain liquid while others appeared to be loaded with solid material. The ships lay in only 15-20 feet of water, and Porter estimated they had sunk about 10 to 12 years ago, based on the size of the corals which had grown on their hulls.

The barrels were clearly leaking material into the water, and Hoverkamp took samples to determine if they held toxic materials. In addition, Porter said there was at least one compressed gas cylinders clearly visible, though what was inside the cylinders--if anything--was unknown.

The team also used a device called a magnetometer to study the craters thought to have been created by hurricanes and found that all sectors of the crater walls had "metallic objects" or shrapnel in them, which, Porter said, confirm that bombs or explosives caused the craters.

The team named the off-island shipwreck sites the "Reef of Barrels" and the "Barge of Barrels." The Reef of Barrels consists of a ship at least 100 feet long and 35 feet wide with between 150 and 200 barrels showing from a partially breached hull. Porter said this site is extremely dangerous because of an abundance of live artillery shells and bombs.

The Barge of Barrels site includes a barge whose hull is broken in two, with a stern section 105 feet long and a disintegrating bow section at least 15 feet long. Porter said the team's best estimate is that there are perhaps 900-1000 barrels at this site, which is also littered with unexploded ordnance.

"There were two types of 55-gallon drums at both sites," said Porter. "They had either screw-on bung-hole stoppers or strap-down lids. The former are designed for liquids and the latter for solids."

Porter has been widely quoted in the past few years as an expert on the decline of coral reefs, especially in south Florida, and his work has led to new knowledge about how corals grow and thrive.

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EDITORS NOTE: Photos of James Porter and underwater photos of the bomb site are available for download from the University of Georgia's photographic services Web server (<http://photo.alumni.uga.edu>). For additional information contact Rick O'Quinn at 706/542-8085 or roquinn@uga.edu.